

## Lesson Unit 4: Impermanence

### Learning Outcomes:

At the completion of the lesson, the students will be able to

- Explain impermanence, suffering, and non-self as the three characteristics of existence
- Explain impermanence as a positive concept that gives up opportunity to start life anew
- Explain the reality of life with reference to the original sources
- Quote from the discourses in defining impermanence

### Student Activities:

- Read each of the Readings carefully and underline/ highlight the key words and concepts in each reading.
- Draw a mind-map around the main topic linking the key words and concepts that you underlined or highlighted in the readings showing their relationship to the main topic and also to each other
- Read the given original sources to be familiar with the texts

For your journal entries, write detailed accounts on the following: three characteristics of existence, *aniccatā* (impermanency), *niccatā* (permanency)

### Reading 1: The Three Marks (*tilakkhana*)

The formula of the three marks is found in many places. It runs:

- All compounded things (*sankhāras*) are impermanent
- All compounded things (*sankhāras*) are unsatisfactory

All dhammas (all things including the unconditioned) are without self

The first and second of these marks apply to all mundane things, everything that 'exists' (*sankhāra* in its widest sense). The third refers in addition to the unconditioned element (*a-sankhata*, that is, not a *sankhāra*, thus Nibbāna). This does not 'exist' (relatively), but IS.

Thus, nothing lasts for ever, all things being subject to change and disappearance. Nothing is completely satisfactory: *dukkha*, conventionally rendered 'suffering', has the wide meaning of not satisfying, frustrating, painful in whatever degree. Even pleasant things come to an end or cease to attract, and the painful aspect of life is too well-known and ubiquitous to need discussion.

The first two marks can perhaps be appreciated without too much effort, even though their profound penetration is more difficult. It is the third mark that has provoked much controversy and misunderstanding.

*An-attā* (*an-ātman*) is the negative of *attā/ātman* 'self'. So much is clear. In ordinary usage *attā* is a pronoun used for all persons and genders, singular and plural, meaning, 'myself', 'herself', 'ourselves', 'themselves', etc. It has no metaphysical implications whatsoever. This, then, is the self of daily life, which has a purely relative and conventional reality if only because it is an almost indispensable expression in everyday speech. As a noun, *attā* to the Buddhist means an imaginary entity, a so-called 'self', which is not really there. The five *khandhas* or aggregates, the various parts that make up our empirical personality, do not constitute a self, either individually or collectively. Our so called 'self', then, is something bogus. It is, however, a concept that we cling to with great tenacity.

Any theory that the Buddha taught such a doctrine as the Upanishadic Higher Self can only be said to fly in the face of evidence. This is borne out by the third mark: all dhammas are without

self. The term dhamma here includes Nibbāna, the Buddhist ultimate. Thus this is expressly stated not to be any kind of 'Higher Self'. There are those who believe that what the Buddha taught and what the Upanishads taught must agree. Be that as it may at some deeper level, the expression is certainly different. It is arguable that the Buddha considered the term 'self', which to him was something evanescent, to be ludicrously inappropriate to the supreme reality, whatever its nature. To pursue such arguments as this any further is surely fruitless.

## Reading 2: Change Makes Us New

Three Characteristics of the "dependently arisen" phenomena (*Patīccasamuppānā Dhammā*) are *anicca* – impermanence, *dukkha* – suffering, and *anatta* – no-self. *Anicca* means impermanent, change, and *aniccatā* means impermanency. In the texts, the character of *anicca* is pointed out in a variety of terms: *uppāda/ udaya* – arising, *vaya* – passing away, *thitassa aññathatta* – change of what has been, and *viparināma-dhamma* – subject to change. What is born is sure to perish. Flux of becoming is like a moving stream – "You cannot step twice into the same river", more accurately, there is no one person who could jump twice into the same river. The change takes place both in one's own life and in the external world. *Samvatta* and *vivatta* means evolution and dissolution, and they convey the rapid change that takes place in the universe. When understood properly, in the world there are only actions and no static things. Only the action verbs can convey the reality, not the nouns.

The opposite word of *anicca* is *nicca* which means permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. As understood by Brāhmaṇism, ātman, the individual soul and Brahman, the universal soul are two such permanent things. God is considered by the western religions to be permanent. It is said that "long ago, God created the world within six days and on the seventh day He took a rest." Caste system in India is given as a permanent system. The status to which you are born cannot be changed. "Born Buddhists" is another such concept.

That there is no Permanent entity, event, or situation is the Buddhist concept. The Buddha took a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said: "There is not even this much form that is permanent." The Buddha took a little lump of cow-dung in his hand and said: "There is not even this much individual existence that is permanent." At this very moment, change is taking place in the cosmos; the world; countries; companies; societies; organizations; families; trees in the garden; the flower on the altar; my whole personality; my body, limbs, perception, feeling, karma, mind; my finger nail.

Have I seen the change? I have seen the growth/ aging in me, my family members, associates, relatives, and teachers. I have witnessed the deaths of my close ones. I have experienced sickness; unions and separations. This is *anicca*. Buddha shows *aniccatā* in our past life. "While on this long voyage, you wandered aimlessly from birth to birth, and you groaned and you wept because you had a share in what you hated and you did not have a share in what you liked. There have flowed; there have been shed by you more tears than there is water in the four great oceans." (S II, 180)

Aging and Death means *anicca*. Suppose four huge rocks were to come rolling in towards a person while crushing everything on their way, what could he do? King Pasenadi confesses: "If such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds." Buddha informs: "I inform you, great king, I announce to you: aging and death are rolling in on you." "Short is the life span of human beings." "The days and nights go flying by. Life comes to stop." "Time flies by, the nights swiftly

pass, the stages of life successively desert us, seeing clearly this danger in death, one should do deeds of merit that brings happiness/ a seeker of peace should drop the world's bait."

Undiscoverable is the beginning of *samsāra* (one's journey through the cycle of birth and death). Gone are the previous Buddhas and their disciples; the previous country/ city names and the people lived there; the previous civilizations and dynasties. "See, that name for this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Buddha has attained *parinirvāṇa*; So impermanent are formations, so unstable, so unreliable; It is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them; There will come a time when the name for this mountain will have disappeared, when these people will have died, and I (the Buddha) will have attained *parinirvāṇa*; Impermanent, alas, are formations, subject to arising and vanishing"(S II, 190-93).

Impermanence of the earth and the continuity of suffering are illustrated as follows: "There comes a time when the great earth burns up and perishes and no longer exists." "There comes a time when the great ocean dried up and evaporates and no longer exists." "But still there is no making end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving."

Impermanence of the Five Aggregates is shown: form is like a lump of foam (*phena-piṇḍa*); Feeling is like a water bubble (*bubbula*); perception is like a mirage (*marīci*); formations are like a plantain trunk (*kadali-kkhandha*); consciousness is like an illusion (*māyā*).

Mind is constantly in flux. A drawing is designed in its diversity by the mind. Mind is more diverse than that drawing. Compared to our physical world, our mental world is fast changing.

Benefits of cultivating the perception of impermanence are highlighted. Meditation on impermanence eliminates all sensual lust; all lust for existence; all ignorance. It uproots conceit 'I am'.

Change means new beginning to life. Birth days, new year, wedding celebrates this change and the new opportunity given to life to start things new. Boredom could be avoided when we realize the change. "What exists is changeable and what is not changeable does not exist." The opportunities given to us by our fall, failure, loss, contempt, sorrow, despair, dissatisfaction, and fear are rise, success, gain, honor, happiness, delight, satisfaction, and hope.

If everything is subject to change, we must be willing to change ourselves. Otherwise, we suffer. Progress, development, cultivation, improvement, new thinking are all possible because of "change". New resolves are made because we accept the change. Siddhartha renounced the world and became a Buddha. King Pasenadi reduced his weight.

## Notes for Reflection

### Change Makes Us New

#### Three Characteristics of the "dependently arisen" phenomena (*Paṭiccasamuppannā Dhammā*)

*Anicca* – impermanence

*Dukkha* – suffering

*Anatta* – no-self

#### ***Anicca* – impermanent, change – *aniccatā* = impermanency**

*Uppāda/ udaya* - arising

Vaya - passing away  
Thitassa aññathatta – change of what has been  
Viparināma-dhamma – subject to change  
What is born is sure to perish  
Flux of becoming like a moving stream – “You cannot step twice into the same river”  
Samvaṭṭa and vivaṭṭa (evolution and dissolution)

Actions verbs – no nouns  
Opposite Word = Nicca - permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change

Atman – Individual Soul  
Brahman – Universal Soul  
God – “Long ago, God created the world within six days and on the seventh day He took a rest.”

Caste system in India  
“Born Buddhists”

### **No Permanency**

The Buddha took a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said: “There is not even this much form that is permanent.”

The Buddha took a little lump of cow-dung in his hand and said: “There is not even this much individual existence that is permanent.”

At this very moment, change is taking place in the cosmos; the world; countries; companies; societies; families; trees in the garden, the flower on the altar; my whole personality; my body, limbs, perception, feeling, karma, mind

### **Have I seen the change?**

Growth/ aging in me, my family members, associates, relatives, teachers  
Deaths of my close ones  
Sickness  
Unions and separations

“While on this long voyage, you wandered aimlessly from birth to birth, and you groaned and you wept because you had a share in what you hated and you did not have a share in what you liked. There have flowed, there have been shed by you more tears than there is water in the four great oceans.” (S II, 180)

### **Aging and Death**

“If such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds.”  
(King Pasenadi)

“I inform you, great king, I announce to you: aging and death are rolling in on you.”  
(Buddha)

“Short is the life span of human beings.”

“The days and nights go flying by. Life comes to stop.”

"Time flies by, the nights swiftly pass, the stages of life successively desert us, seeing clearly this danger in death, one should do deeds of merit that brings happiness/ a seeker of peace should drop the world's bait."

Undiscoverable is the beginning of *saṃsāra* (one's journey through the cycle of birth and death)

Gone are the previous Buddhas and their disciples; the previous country/ city names and the people lived there; the previous civilizations and dynasties

"See, that name for this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Buddha has attained parinirvāṇa; So impermanent are formations, so unstable, so unreliable; It is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them; There will come a time when the name for this mountain will have disappeared, when these people will have died, and I (the Buddha) will have attained parinirvāṇa; Impermanent, alas, are formations, subject to arising and vanishing." (S II, 190-93)

### **Impermanence of the earth and the continuity of suffering**

"There comes a time when the great earth burns up and perishes and no longer exists." "There comes a time when the great ocean dried up and evaporates and no longer exists."

"But still there is no making end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving."

### **Impermanence of the Five Aggregates**

Form is like a lump of foam (*phena-piṇḍa*)  
Feeling is like a water bubble (*bubbula*)  
Perception is mirage (*marīci*)  
Formations are like a plantain trunk (*kadali-kkhandha*)  
Consciousness is like an illusion (*māyā*)

### **Mind**

A drawing is designed in its diversity by the mind  
Mind is more diverse than that drawing  
Compare to our physical world, our mental world is fast changing  
Benefits of cultivating the perception of impermanence  
It eliminates all sensual lust; all lust for existence; all ignorance  
It uproots conceit 'I am'

Change and New beginnings to life  
Birth days, new year, wedding  
Boredom

"What exists is changeable and what is not changeable does not exist."

The opportunities given to us by our fall, failure, loss, contempt, sorrow, despair, dissatisfaction, and fear are rise, success, gain, honor, happiness, delight, satisfaction, and hope.

If everything is subject to change, we must be willing to change ourselves. Otherwise, we suffer.

Progress, development, cultivation, improvement, new thinking = all are possible because of "change"

## **New resolves**

Siddhartha renounced the world and became a Buddha  
King Pasenadi reduced his weight.

## **Reading from the Original Sources**

### **Aging and Death**

At Savatthi, King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, is anyone who is born free from aging and death?"

"Great king, no one who is born is free from aging and death. Even those affluent khattiyas – rich, with great wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, abundant treasures and commodities, abundant wealth and grain – because they have been born, are not freed from aging and death. Even those affluent Brahmins ... affluent householders – rich ... with abundant wealth and grain – because they have been born, are not free from aging and death. Even those monks who are arahants, whose taints are destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and are completely liberated through final knowledge: even for them this body is subject to breaking up, subject to being laid down. (SN I, 163-4)

### **The Vicissitudes of Life**

"These eight worldly conditions, monks, keep the world turning around, and the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.

These eight worldly conditions, monks, are encountered by an uninstructed worldling, and they are also encountered by an instructed noble disciple. What now is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between an instructed noble disciple and an uninstructed worldling?" ....

"When an uninstructed worldling, monks, comes upon gain, he does not reflect on it thus: 'This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change.' He does not know it as it really is. And when he comes upon loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, he does not reflect on them thus: 'All these are impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change.' He does not know them as they really are. With such a person, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain keep his mind engrossed. When gain comes he is elated and when he meets with loss he is dejected. When fame comes he is elated and when he meets with disrepute he is dejected. When praise comes he is elated and when he meets with blame he is dejected. When he experiences pleasure he is elated and when he experiences pain he is dejected. Being thus involved in likes and dislikes, he will not be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; he will not be freed from suffering, I say.

When an instructed noble disciple comes upon gain, he reflects on it thus: 'This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change.' And so he will reflect when loss and so forth come upon him. He understands all these things as they really are, and they do not engross his mind. Thus he will not be elated by gain and dejected by loss; elated by fame and dejected by disrepute; elated by praise and dejected by blame; elated by pleasure and dejected by pain. Having thus given up likes and dislikes, he will be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; he will be freed from suffering, I say. (AN IV, 157-9)

## **Life is Short and Fleeting**

"Long ago, O monks, there lived a religious teacher named Araka, who was free of sensual lust. He had many hundreds of disciples, and this was the doctrine he taught to them:

"Short is the life of human beings, O Brahmins, limited and brief; it is full of suffering, full of tribulation. This one should wisely understand. One should do good and live a pure life; for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as a dew drop on the tip of a blade of grass will quickly vanish at sunrise and will not last long; even so, Brahmins, is human life like a dew drop. It is short, limited, and brief; it is full of suffering, full of tribulation. This one should wisely understand. One should do good and live a pure life; for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as, when rain falls from the sky in thick drops, a bubble appearing on the water will quickly vanish and will not last long; even so, Brahmins, is human life like a water bubble. It is short ... for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as a line drawn on water with a stick will quickly vanish and will not last long; even so, Brahmins, is human life like a line drawn on water. It is short ... for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as a mountain stream, coming from afar, swiftly flowing, carrying along much flotsam, will not stand still for a moment, an instant, a second, but will rush on, swirl and flow forward; even so, Brahmins, is human life like a mountain stream. It is short ... for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as a strong man might form a lump of spittle at the tip of his tongue and spit it out with ease; even so, Brahmins, is human life like a lump of spittle. It is short ... for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as a piece of meat thrown into an iron pan heated all day will quickly burn up and will not last long; even so, Brahmins, human life like this piece of meat. It is short ... for none who is born can escape death.

"Just as, when a cow to be slaughtered is led to the shambles, whenever she lifts a leg she will be closer to slaughter, closer to death; even so, Brahmins, is human life like cattle doomed to slaughter; it is short, limited, and brief. It is full of suffering, full of tribulation. This one should wisely understand. One should do good and live a pure life; for none who is born can escape death.'

"But at that time, O monks, the human lifespan was 60,000 years, and at 500 years girls were ready for marriage. In those days people had but six afflictions: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, excrement, and urine. Though people lived so long and had so few afflictions, that teacher Araka gave to his disciples such a teaching: 'Short is the life of human beings ...'

"But nowadays, O monks, one could rightly say, 'Short is the life of human beings ...'; for today one who lives long lives for a hundred years or a little more. And when living for a hundred years, it is just for three hundred seasons: a hundred winters, a hundred summers, and a hundred rains. When living for three hundred seasons, it is just for twelve hundred months: four hundred winter months, four hundred summer months, and four hundred months of the rains. When living for twelve hundred months, it is just for twenty-four hundred fortnights: eight hundred fortnights of winter, eight hundred of summer, and eight hundred of the rains.

"And when living for twenty-four hundred fortnights, it is just for 36,000 days: 12,000 days of winter, 12,000 of summer, and 12,000 of the rains. And when living for 36,000 days, he eats just

72,000 meals: 24,000 meals in winter, 24,000 in summer, and 24,000 in the rains. And this includes the taking of mother's milk and the times without food. These are the times without food: when agitated or grieved or sick, when observing a fast, or when not obtaining anything to eat.

"Thus, O monks, I have reckoned the life of a centenarian: the limit of his lifespan, the number of seasons, years, months, and fortnights, of days and nights, of his meals and foodless times.

"Whatever should be done by a compassionate teacher who, out of compassion, seeks the welfare of his disciples, that I have done for you. These are the roots of trees, O monks, these are empty huts. Meditate, monks, do not be negligent, or else you will regret it later. This is our instruction to you." (AN IV, 136-9)